

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” Isn’t that odd? Perhaps this sounds odd because it goes against how we want God to operate in our lives? Notice what James says here in this reading. He talks about meeting trials of various kinds, and he connects this with the testing of your faith. Anytime we hear that testing word we should stop and think about what this means.

The word used here in Greek for testing has a meaning of “the process or means of determining the genuineness of something.” 1 Peter 1 also has this word when he wrote, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”

James, and those words from Peter there teach, admonish, encourage, and comfort you as you sit here this morning. The odd part, though, comes in when we start to think about how God fits into this whole picture. So how are you to view times of trial and testing? James teaches you, “Count it all joy.” Peter also says to rejoice. Testing is good for us even if it sometimes may be unpleasant or downright painful in some fashion. Yet this still doesn’t leave us into some abstraction or unknown. There’s a danger in trying blame consequences of our sinful actions on God. God is not the author of sin or evil. Temptation is different from testing. We know “God tempts no one” as James himself says yet God does test us as he has tested others who have gone before us. Abraham is a prime example of this as he was tested with the near sacrifice of Isaac. Psalm 66 cries out, “For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried.” God’s testing is done for the sake of his people and is always to lead them back to him making them stronger in the process whereas temptation comes from the devil, the world, and our fallen flesh to lead us into sin, despair, and other great shame and vices, which is to say, away from God.

Our sinful nature, though, doesn’t want God to try and test us. We want God to be the nice guy who affirms who we are and what we want. We don’t want God, in our sinful hearts, to actual be a good Father who pushes his children so that they would learn and grow or discipline us, as Hebrews 12 says is a mark of our sonship, when we go astray so that we would return and not go down that path of unrighteousness again. But here’s the thing, God is our Father, and we are his children, and he does treat us as we need because he loves and cares for us fully and perfectly. The Father gave up his own Son so that we would be redeemed. This is who our God is and even those times when we act like spoiled children who kick, scream, and threaten, he’s always going to treat us as our Father because of the person and work of his only begotten Son.

James brings up a specific thing here when it comes to the various trials we meet. He is, in this reading, talking about the suffering of a Christian who belongs to Christ. Counting it joy when you meet trials of various kinds only happens when you fix your eyes on Christ who is the author and perfecter of your faith. When you face times of trial and testing this is where you are to look. It’s not for answers and it’s not for you to run headlong by yourself into these things. No God admonishes you to go running to his promises. Go running to his means of grace. In all this your Lord is saying to you, “fix your eyes on Christ.” Take your eyes off Jesus and there will be no joy in times of trial only despair. You might not always know or realize what is happening during the times of trial or testing but you always know who your God is and what he has done for you in Christ.

St. James of Jerusalem, Brother of Jesus, and Martyr—October 23, 2022

Suffering though is not simply for its own sake. There's no value in simply suffering. Christians don't rejoice in suffering; you lament it because of the fall into sin. Where you do find value in suffering is when you see your Lord preaching to you and showing you mercy through all of this and pointing you to what is to come. In the case of persecution, which St. James knew all too well as he is a martyr, Jesus in the Beatitudes said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Suffering for the sake of Christ and his kingdom is to be blessed by God.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, God will guard and preserve you even as he himself can use those times of trial for your benefit unto everlasting life. Did you catch the word here James uses for what the testing of your faith produces? It's "steadfastness." How does he do he do this? Well, God calls you to listen. His word goes out. His word refines you. His word convicts you and shows you that need to turn from your sin, yourself, and the world and to him. His word gives you Christ whose suffering won for you salvation. As you go through the trials and testing you are more resolute in your gaze upon Jesus. Like a ship that is tossed back in forth in the stormy gale you keep moving forward heading toward the shore not turning back or changing course. When the storm calms you see that you have been preserved, just as God promised, and you are all the closer to what lies ahead.

Is it any coincidence, then, when James goes on further, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways." Not only does God produce a steadfast faith but he grants you wisdom. He gives you the wisdom to ask of God and know that he will hear and answer your prayers. He gives you the wisdom to look at this life on this side of the grave and know that these things when it comes to sin, suffering, and death are but a passing moment.

So, what's the comfort in all this today? James ends by saying, "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him." The crown of life is yours and your future glory. How? Go back to the beginning of all this when it comes to how you see your times of trial and suffering. Fix your eyes on Christ. There something you see when you see him. He has a crown, a crown of thorns as you see him crucified for you. He is the Lord who has suffering in your place and his suffering heals you for "by his wounds you are healed." His suffering is your redemption. Not only that but having accomplished your salvation he has ascended to the right hand of the Father and all glory and honor belongs to him. His crown is the crown of the Lord who rules and governs all things. Even as he may try and test you, he does so as one who rules victoriously over sin, death, and the devil. All things are under his dominion even as one day all his enemies will be under his feet.

Besides all this, he says that you will receive a crown. That's right, you will receive the crown of life because the Lord of life who is the Resurrection and the Life has baptized you and you have what he has won for you. The day is coming when testing and trials will be over just as all sin, death, and the assaults of the devil will be no more. That day you will be raised imperishable, and you will have a crown that does not fade away in its splendor. Not only will you receive it, but you are not alone as God's child. You have been gathered into the Holy Christian Church.

AC XXI begins, "Our churches teach that the history of saints may be set before us so that we may follow the example of their faith and good works, according to our calling." How appropriate it is, then, for you to consider those who have gone before you in the faith and honor them for together you are the church of God even if they are on the other side of the grave in the Church the Triumphant, the church on earth here and now, the Church Militant is still the same church. The crown promised to you is the crown they now wear just as all who die in Christ receive the crown. For the martyrs who have gone before you this crown came sooner rather than later.

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James, who wrote these words of the Epistle reading suffered all for the sake of the Gospel. God showed him great mercy. Scripture tells you James at first didn't believe the Gospel, yet he was converted. He looked to Christ, his own half-brother, and he had life. God strengthened him and produced a steadfastness that suffering all even death rather than forsake the one he at once rejected. God blessed him in this and though he lost his life, he gained everything. Even dying is not defeat for the Christian rather it's being brought into the nearer presence of the Lord who has forgiven you and gives you life. Now he is one of those faithful saints in the faith, among a countless host we don't know their names that Hebrews 12 says, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." This is the teaching and comfort God proclaims to you.

When you suffer for the sake of Christ and his church you are in good company. When you go through times of trial and testing, rejoice. In all things fix your eyes on Jesus for he and he alone is the one who has redeemed you and gives you reason to always rejoice and in all circumstances. He will never put you to shame but will exalt you at the proper time. Your sin is forgiven, and you have eternal life. That means everything and that defines your life no matter what you may face. You don't lack anything in Jesus rather you have everything. So even if you should suffer the fate of a martyr, do so singing the *Te Deum*, knowing you stand in good company with those who have gone before you. Do so, though, with the confidence as a baptized child of God who sin is forgiven, you have been rescued from death and the devil and given eternal salvation. That's what God says you have because Christ has lived for you, is crucified for you, and risen from the dead for you. "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." You indeed lack nothing; rejoice, you have a crown of life now and forever.

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